

FARM LABOR TRENDS

by

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We are rapidly nearing the end of the so-called prosperity period occasioned by the war. The prosperity of the past few years has been largely predicated upon "blood, sweat, and tears." In my remarks I will not attempt to forecast the future. It's been a bad year for forecasters. While trends indicate generally lower price levels for staple items, the economic situation in Europe seems still so nebulous that it's difficult to penetrate. But it now seems certain that we'll have many million additional people to feed. That situation calls for sustained, high production of staple food items.

To us, here, the farm labor situation presents many imponderables. Labor unrest is world-wide. We hear much of labor unrest in industry, but very little is generally said about unrest among agricultural labors. Agriculture is still the largest segment of world industry, and the largest number of workers the world over is to be found there. During the war nearly every nation had many men under arms. These men having travelled far and wide, learned and observed much. Much they have learned has been of a destructive nature, but some have added to their general level of education.

The cure for some of the farm labor ills cannot be brought about by revolution, by reaction, but by economic and social evolution. It cannot be denied that the crowding of population accentuates unrest. Less elbow room means more restriction to the individual, keener competition between individuals, states, and nations.

Now, as to our interest in the future of the American farm labor program: If we continue to handle farm labor, it will not merely resolve itself into "the checking in and out" of labor. We will need to harmonize conflicting interests of both employer and employee. During my recent visit to the British Isles, I had occasion to observe the interests referred to. Because of the recent war the British farmer is generally becoming cognizant of the needs other than wages and hours of labor. These other needs they refer to as "social amenities"--better housing, improved sanitation, health, education, recreation, and a fuller rural community life.

A national standard of living is measured by the extent and use of machines, rather than of man labor. Witness the low rural living standards in such countries as India, Italy, China, and the like where labor is pathetically cheap. By contrast, the United States, Canada, British Isles, and Australia show a very much higher standard of living. As a matter of fact, the United States leads the world in the output per man in agriculture. Mechanization during the past 25 years added 55 million more acres of crop land in the United States and with fewer people on the farms. Production efficiency per man increased tremendously. The tractor alone has made possible the use of large and more complicated machines. For example, combines, corn and cotton pickers, large cultivating equipment, pick-up balers, spray rigs, lifting, pulling, pushing, hauling

*Presented by William A. Schoenfeld, Director of Extension Service, Oregon State Agricultural College, Corvallis, Oregon, at the Regional Farm Labor Conference of the Cooperative Extension Service and Labor Branch, PMA, U. S. Department of Agriculture, January 15, 1947, at Salt Lake City, Utah.

equipment, power take-offs for grass and silage cutters and blowers, hydraulic lifts, elevators, portable saws, etc. Wheat production and harvesting is almost completely mechanized. A striking example is the coordinated use of power harvesting equipment over a wide area. The Texas Extension Service along with the other Extension Services, cooperating with the Office of Labor of the central wheat belt, Canada included, successfully coordinated the large wheat combine operators, so that wheat was harvested progressively with its ripening from Texas into Canada. There are some commodities, however, that do not lend themselves to this high degree of mechanization. I have reference to the harvesting of tree and small fruits and of vegetables.

Most of the agricultural production in the United States is by family farm units. Because of this, wages are of direct interest to the farmer operator as well as to the farm laborer. Since both are mutually involved in wage levels, it is of interest to them to keep the wages as high as possible commensurate with general economic conditions. Of course, if the trend of agricultural prices should develop downward, wages of necessity will follow. The rub will come if prices of consumer goods, other than food, remain up; then both farmer and farm laborer will be hurt. This would result in reduced buying power of agriculture, and as the history of the late 20's and early 30's may repeat itself, reduced buying power of agriculture is sure to have a devastating effect upon industry, commerce, and industrial labor. If high wages result in being out of balance with prices, further mechanization in agriculture will result.

Agricultural Labor Bonuses. During the past several years, a number of successful farm operators have paid bonuses at the end of the year to their permanent, year-around farm help. We, in Oregon, along with a number of other States similarly situated, now pay bonuses here and there to seasonal workers who have remained throughout the harvest season. We must not overlook the fact that wages alone will satisfy labor. The "social amenities" previously mentioned, are as much a part of the laborer's pay as the wages. We have seen the need of improvement in rural housing, both for the farmer himself, and for his help. I may add that most farmers recognize this need, but the circumstances of the war years and of the immediate present have made it extremely difficult to provide the necessary and desirable housing. However, the future of farm labor housing calls for functional houses for the married, year-around help, for bachelor, year-around labor, and for the seasonal and transient labor. Many farm labor associations see this need and have taken steps to correct the situation.

Social Security. I would like to discuss for a few moments the value as I see it of the extension of the social security system to cover agricultural labor. As the situation now stands, the rural relief is saddled on the entire community. Relief should be self-supporting. During the working years of a worker's life, regular contributions can be made from wages toward the social security fund to be drawn upon if and when need arises. We have all seen the abuses that have crept in when relief is obtained through political channels. This definitely lowers the moral fiber of both receiver and giver. There seems to be no sound reason why the whole program of unemployment compensation, physical disability, and old age retirement cannot be placed on an actuarial basis, devoid of charitable aspects. The old "poor house" as an efficient relief means is just as antiquated as the horse and buggy. As it is, everyone, whether under social security or not, now pays toward the social security system. These taxes are hidden in nearly all items we buy, still not all are

now eligible to benefit from the Social Security System.

Health, Nutrition, Farm Safety, Medical Care, Hospitalization, Sanitation. Adequate medical care should be available to all groups, regardless of income. But it need not be on a charitable basis. Health insurance is available through voluntary health associations. Hospital facilities are generally inadequate in rural communities. Considerable improvement can be made by community effort, by endowments, and through some such plans as the Blue Cross. Pure water supplies, satisfactory sewage disposal, fly and mosquito control, satisfactory though inexpensive toilet facilities are reasonably well understood and in operation in many communities.

Farm Safety. As a result of increased mechanization, farming has the highest preventable accident record of all major industries. Much education is needed to reduce this record. In this we have both a challenge and an opportunity

Rural Education. In the Salt Lake Telegram of January 14 on page 4, there was this significant statement: "Of the total number of draftees rejected in the past war, 676,000 were either mentally or educationally deficient. Three hundred and fifty thousand couldn't even sign their names." This is certainly a high demerit on our National Defense status. Many of these rejected draftees came from rural areas, where school facilities were inadequate. Thus the local schools become a community, State, and national problem. Paraphrasing an inscription appearing over one of the Harvard University gates which was inscribed there in 1642, I would like to see over the doorway of every schoolhouse in the United States this statement: "This school is created to pass on to posterity an enlightened citizenry." We, in our work, have a definite responsibility toward the education of the youth of migrant and other agricultural workers. How this can be done is too broad a subject to be covered by a few sentences, but it is a problem to which we should give rather early attention.

In many rural communities which use large numbers of transient workers, the churches have collaborated in providing recreation to the life of a community.

Education of Employer Groups. It seems to me that we have a real opportunity of doing some constructive educational and demonstration work among the several farm labor associations and organizations, covering farm labor needs. We should consider them a good vehicle for educational programs. Agricultural colleges should widen their curricula, so that there may be a better understanding among college graduates in agriculture of the economic and social problems in rural communities.

Unionization. Although attempts have been made to organize farm labor into unions at different times in several localities, progress in this direction has not been marked. Where good labor relations exist between employer groups and farm labor, the union movement has not been significant. However, trick wages, intimidation, lack of good housing, and the absence of the necessary "social amenities" are some of the causes that provide the fertile ground upon which unionization will thrive.

The 30 minutes allotted to the discussion of this topic permitted me to present only the broad brush strokes of the farm labor picture. The details of the picture will be presented by able speakers later.

